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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the possibility that native speakers of American English make coordinated modifications in their speech to non-native addressees, depending on the degree to which the conversation is conventionalized. The specific exchange analyzed was direction-giving, and evidence of use of a "foreigner" register was sought in type-token ratios, t-units, and such interactional features as comprehension checks. Results support the idea that direction-giving is highly conventionalized, with direction-givers making few modifications in the form and content of discourse to non-native addressees. However, some variations correlated systematically with the ethnicity and sex of both the addressee and the direction-giver. (Author/MSE)

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Conventionalized Conversation:

A Constraint on 'Foreigner Register'

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Abstract

This paper qualifies the claim that speakers of American English make coordinated modifications in their speech to non-native addressees. Modification depends, in part, upon the degree to which a particular conversation-type is conventionalized for members of the target speech community; highly conventionalized conversation-types preclude the occurrence of significant amounts of 'foreigner register'.

The specific exchange analyzed here is direction-giving (N=200). Scotton and Bernsten (1988) found great uniformity in this exchange-type across differing native speaker identities. In extending the scope of the study to encompass non-native addressees and relevant measurements of 'foreigner register' (e.g., type-token ratios, t-units), this study adds strong support to the claim that direction-giving is highly conventionalized: direction-givers make few modifications in the form and content of discourse to non-native addressees. Nonetheless, some variations do occur. These are systematically correlated, however, not only with the social identity of the addressee, but also with that of the direction-giver. Gender is also a mediating variable.

Conventionalized Conversation: A Constraint on 'Foreigner Register'

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The primary purpose of this paper is to measure the degree to which native speakers of American English (NS) make systematic modifications, i.e., use features of 'foreigner register', in giving directions to non-native addressees on a university campus. A second purpose is to examine gender of both direction giver and seeker as interacting variables in such modifications. Quantitative evidence that bears on both the overall discourse structure and the structural variation of sub-parts of the direction-giving exchange will be reported.

Data were gathered from 200 American university students (100 women and 100 men) who were walking along the same temporary footbridge near construction for a new library on the Arizona State University campus. Four student direction-seekers (2 Asians and 2 Americans, a male and a female in each category) asked the same question: Excuse me, how do I get to Gammage Auditorium? Each seeker audio-recorded 50 exchanges, 25 from males, 25 from females for the total of 200 exchanges. All direction-seekers were told to

respond minimally and display general comprehension.

Hypotheses for this study were generated from two sources: a) from the mushrooming literature on 'foreigner register' (see Long 1981 for a review), and b) from two studies on direction-giving between native speakers (Scotton and Bernsten 1988) and Scotton (1987).

Many studies characterize 'foreigner talk' on the basis of native speaker simplifications including shorter utterances, lower syntactic complexity, or avoidance of low frequency vocabulary (e.g. Arthur et al 1980). Long (1983), however, argues that NS's modify not only their speech to non-native speakers, but also various features of the interactional structure of their conversations with them, by making clarification requests or giving comprehension checks, for example. The theoretical interest in both sentence-level and interactional modification has been in working toward the testing of the claim that only linguistic input which is comprehensible to the learner is relevant data for second language acquisition.

In this study, I want to test for the presence of both levels of 'foreigner register', as measured in such features as t-units

and type-token ratios on the one hand, as well as in such interactional features as comprehension checks on the other. For example, will NS's use less complex language and check the understanding of their addressees more frequently when the persons seeking directions are NNS's as opposed to NS's?

The studies on direction-giving between NS's (Scotton 1987; Bernsten and Scotton 1988) demonstrate the strong structural uniformity of the directions given to seekers of diverse social identities (including age, gender and status as variables). Findings show convincingly that direction-giving is a highly conventionalized conversation exchange-type on the university campus. I want to test whether the ethnicity of the non-native addressee will create an exception to this uniformity. Secondly, these studies tested for the effects of gender of both seeker and giver, and found one general reversal in expectations. That is, whereas male direction-givers were expected to be more direct and more brief than the females, the data indicated that women were more straightforward than men. Their studies, however, did not test all variables for statistical significance; furthermore, some effects were only marginally significant. Also, no significant

variations for seeker gender were reported. Therefore, I want to replicate the portion of the study which tested gender as a main effect for both direction-seeker and direction-giver.

Structure of the Exchange

Categories for defining the overall structure of the direction-giving exchange are adapted from Scotton and Bernsten (1988). There are five constituent parts after the initial question, EXCUSE ME, HOW DO I GET TO GAMMAGE AUDITORIUM?: an opening section, the directions themselves, parenthetical remarks during the directions, a pre-closing and a closing, exemplified as follows:

a) an opening section, containing one or more of the following openers: pause, interjection/filler (e.g. OH, GOSH), question repeat (e.g. GAMMAGE?), different question (e.g. WHERE DO YOU WANT TO GO?), summary statement (e.g. GAMMAGE CENTER IS WAY BACK THERE), or a comment (e.g. LET'S SEE)

b) the directions, composed of four main directive-types:

1. Bald imperative (TAKE THAT TO THE NEXT MALL)

2. Indirect types, including:

a. implied directives, (IT SHOULD BE A LITTLE TO YOUR LEFT)

b. directives that begin with:

1) a conditional clause, (IF YOU GO DOWN HERE AND GO STRAIGHT, YOU'LL . . .)

2) an extraposition clause, (WHAT YOU CAN DO IS GO ALL THE WAY TO THIS MALL)

3. You + aux (YOU'VE GOT TO TURN AROUND; YOU WILL NEED TO GO MORE TOWARDS THE RIGHT)

4. You + directive (YOU HEAD DOWN HERE TO THIS CROSSWALK)

c) parenthetical remarks during the directions which comment on the directions (IT'S REALLY BIG)

d) a pre-closing which synthesizes the directions (IT'S OVER IN THAT DIRECTION)

e) a closing, which is a response to 'Thank you' (e.g., informal, e.g., YUP; formal, e.g., YOU'RE WELCOME)

These parts are illustrated sequentially in example 1 where S = seeker and G = giver:

EXAMPLE 1

S: Excuse me, how do I get to Gammage Auditorium?

G: Um, go down here and then you're gonna have to go that way and then go right.

S: Ok.

G: And then go all the way down to the next, it will be like the next walk, you know, it'll go this way.

S: Ok.

G: And then make a left, and then just go north and then turn south and you'll be able to see it. It's just directly that way.

S: Ok.

G: So just go down that way and then that way.

S: Ok, thank you.

G: Sure.

Results

Findings are based on a three-way factorial MANOVA design (with SAS) for the continuous variables and chi-square for the categorical variables. In summarizing, we can say above all that direction-giving is highly conventionalized. Very few features of 'foreigner register' are present. More gender effects, but still dramatically few, are to be found. However, at the same time, the social identity both of the direction-giver and of the direction-seeker are significant influences on a certain range of linguistic choices in the exchange. Therefore, while there is

societal consensus on the structure of direction-giving, speakers do give systematic consideration to the social identities of their addressees.

The main findings are as follows:

1. Of the three main effects, seeker ethnicity, seeker gender, and giver gender, the greatest measurable influence is seeker gender, followed by giver gender. Seeker ethnicity, surprisingly, is least influential.

2. Looking first at seeker ethnicity, we find the following three outcomes:

a) there was more hedging to NS's versus NNS's;

b) directions to NNS's contained more closings and more formal closings;

c) directions to NS's contained more informal closings

3. Looking next at seeker gender, we find more elaboration to females: females received more combinations of directive types, more combinations of features in the opening section, somewhat more complex vocabulary (as measured in a higher type-token ratio), and more parenthetical remarks.

4. When it comes to giver gender, only two findings are important:

a) males issued more indirect directives

b) females issued more comprehension checks, typically a feature of 'foreigner register', but here dependent instead on the seeker gender, not whether the addressee is a non-native speaker of English.

5. Interaction effects among two or three of the variables were important in three cases reported fully below.

A look at results according to each sequential component reveals uniformities as well as systematic variations. First, an opening section was present in 92% of the exchanges. Furthermore, in 55% of these cases, some combination of openers was used, while in 45% only one opening feature occurred before the directions, usually a filler. Although Scotton and Bernsten found that males used more combinations than females, in my data gender made no difference; roughly half of the women (49%) and half of the men (52%) used combinations. Similarly, opening sections to NS's and NNS's alike included the same number of combinations. However, two other differences are significant. Females received more

openings which contained a summary statement ($p < .007$), and they also received more combinations of opening features ($p < .002$). In other words, females received more elaboration in the opening section.

Females also received more variety in the directions themselves. Although a large majority of subjects (84%) used more than one directive-type, female seekers received significantly more directive-types ($p < .05$).

More generally, a total of 1004 directives were issued, at an average of 5 per subject, exactly the same finding as Scotton and Bernsten. When it comes to use of the four main directive-types, the only break from uniformity across givers and seekers is that males issued more indirect directives than females ($p < .02$). It is, of course, interesting that in the use of bald imperatives, women were as direct as men. There was also an interaction effect among all three variables for you + aux directives ($p < .02$).

Parenthetical remarks were distributed uniformly according to seeker ethnicity and giver gender. However, again females received more elaboration relative to males: 57% (218) of such remarks were addressed to females versus 43% (167) to males, almost

significant at $p < .06$.

In addition to parenthetical remarks, I examined two interactional structures in the middle, direction-giving section of the exchange. They are orientation checks such as DO YOU KNOW WHERE THE FOUNTAIN IS? and comprehension checks, such as DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I'M SAYING? or ALL RIGHT? I had expected a significant amount of these structures in speech directed to NNS's, in accordance with Long's (1983) findings in laboratory conversation. In fact, however, these structures were very infrequent (36 orientation checks and 64 comprehension checks). Furthermore, the unexpected significant effect was giver gender, not seeker ethnicity, as had been predicted. Females used 45 comprehension checks, males only 19 ($p < .001$). There was also an interaction effect for comprehension checks for the two seeker variables ($p < .04$).

Overall fluency was measured in hedges, fillers, and pauses. In general, direction-givers were very fluent. Yet significant effects were noted both for hedges and for pauses. Twice as many hedges, such as I think or probably, were issued to NS's as to NNS's, (88 vs. 42) ($p < .0005$). Also, of the 57 pauses, 46 came

from females ($p < .0002$). Fillers were used infrequently, at the rate of less than two per subject, and only 45% of the givers used a filler beyond the opening section. No significant effects associated with fillers were found.

Pre-closings were uniformly present. That is, no significant effects were observed.

A majority of contributions (90%) contained a closing, and equal numbers of males and females included this section. However, NNS's received more closings ($p < .001$) and more of the formal closing types ($p < .03$). Conversely, NS's received more of the informal types ($p < .004$), and there was an interactive effect between seeker gender and ethnicity here ($p < .01$). Speakers were definitely taking their addressees into account in the closing section.

The three remaining dependent variables, number of words, length of t-units, and type-token ratios, which may be loosely grouped as measures of complexity, did not vary under any main effect. However, type-token ratio was marginally significant for seeker gender, in the direction of greater complexity to females ($p < .06$).

To re-summarize the findings, we can say that the typical direction-giving exchange, at least on American university campuses, is even more highly conventionalized than earlier studies have suggested. Neither the gender of the direction-giver nor the gender or ethnicity of the direction-seeker has a far-reaching influence on the structure or the sequencing of the exchange. However, of these three variables, seeker gender seems to have the greatest effect.

Specifically, female addressees, regardless of their ethnicity, received more elaborate directions as measured in more features in the opening section, more directive-types, more parenthetical remarks and somewhat more complex vocabulary.

The gender of the direction-giver was important only on three counts. Males used more indirect directives; females used more comprehension checks and paused more.

Finally, the ethnicity of the direction-seeker seemed to be least important. Native speakers did receive significantly more hedges and more informal closings, while non-native speakers received more closings and more formal closings, but many features of 'foreigner register' that were expected simply did not occur.

Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from these findings. First, the parameters of conventionalized conversation-types such as direction-giving seem to be very well defined. The absence of the typical features of 'foreigner register' both indicates and constitutes this conventionalization. Presumably, more 'foreigner register' would appear in conversations for which a community script is less available. Of course, it would also likely appear in problematic exchanges where seekers display a lack of comprehension. However, where the addressee apparently comprehends, there is likely to be very little accommodation by speakers to non-native addressees. The much-sought-after 'comprehensible input' will not be triggered by appearance and 'foreign accent' alone.

This uniformity raises implications for the ESL classroom. Specifically, teaching and acquiring main components and ways of interacting during direction-giving and receiving may be relatively easy. Yet at the same time, ESL students need to be taught to expect very little special linguistic treatment from NS's in these very conventionalized exchange-types unless, as

information-seekers, they explicitly indicate lack of understanding or ask directly for help.

Second, according to the data, two modifications are likely to occur, even when the NNS displays comprehension: a) NS's will reduce the level of uncertainty for their listeners by using fewer hedges such as probably, I think, and so on, and b) they will also exhibit more formality and politeness in leave-taking. The linguistic and social implications of these outcomes need to be explored with our ESL learners.

Third, the interesting fact that gender of the addressee was more influential than ethnicity suggests that the same exchange-type can be realized in conventionally different ways according to different group norms. That is, speakers of both genders address women in uniformly, not randomly, different ways than they address men. Why females received more elaboration on several counts than did males, however, when as givers they did not give more elaborated directions, is open to speculation.

The pedagogical question that arises from this gender-related outcome is whether or to what extent gender-based language differences should be taught in the ESL classroom, whether in

direction-giving or in other exchange types. We should probably not limit our students' understanding of gender-related differences to lists or even discussion of the kinds of systematic variations that this study shows. Rather, perhaps we should also give them guided opportunities to test for themselves whether and in what ways gender or other sociolinguistic variables such as age or status are influential factors on how we speak. In this way, second language learners can be direct participants in increasing their communicative proficiency.

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